

Biomass backers: Increase renewable energy percentages

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Advocates of power plants fueled by small trees and pine needles are pushing to have Arizona energy companies generate more electricity by such alternative means.

But they want only small plants to tackle the big problem of forest health.

Steve Gatewood of the Greater Flagstaff Forest Partnership has requested that the Arizona Corporation Commission sharply increase renewable energy requirements it places on the state's electric producers -- moving it from its current 0.8 percent to "something like 10 percent."

While asking for the requirement increase, the Partnership is advocating that biomass plants, which take the forest debris that would otherwise fuel wildfire and burn it for electrical generation, are operated as small "three- to five-megawatt" facilities. Gatewood said this ensures that the plants would not quickly clear out the woods.

"We don't want biomass plants to be structured so as to attack the very resource we're trying to protect," Gatewood said. He noted that small plants placed throughout the state's forested areas, while probably more expensive, is more

effective from a forest health standpoint. "It's a delicate balance between economics and sustainability."

He spoke at a Commission public hearing Friday at the Flagstaff Public Library, where commissioner Kristin Mayes represented the governing board. Mayes was collecting comments on the Commission's plan to revisit the "environmental portfolio standards" of power companies.

Mayes said that the Commission is considering a proposal to require those companies to generate a larger fraction of their power from solar, wind, biomass and other renewable energies. The proposal suggests an increase to 1.1 percent, and it would call for the removal of plans to end requirements in 2012.

It could have a decision as early as this fall.

"I think everybody recognizes that this is an area that's going to grow," Mayes said of renewable energy. "It's going to have to grow."

The Partnership has involved itself with Arizona Public Service. The utility is working with Savannah Pacific to build biomass plant that generates three megawatts, enough electricity operate about 2,500 households a year. It would be part of Savannah Pacific's proposed small-diameter tree sawmill in Bellemont, and the plant would come online some time in 2006 or 2007.

The big plus of such a plant is that it would consume approximately 96 tons of fiber from the forests a day. This translates to about 2,300 acres of forest thinning annually. The Coconino National Forest has an estimated 170,000 acres within that urban-wildland interface, where civilization borders forest, that it hopes to treat during the next 15 years.

Gatewood said APS has done studies and determined that a larger plant -- one that's more along the lines of a 30-megawatt generator -- would quickly deplete the forest fuels of the area and would force them to truck in the material from greater distances.

While the Partnership advocates and expects power companies to have small-scale biomass plants, Gatewood explained that his organization wants the Commission to require power companies to include "renewable energy of all kinds" in a portfolio that has one-tenth of the power coming from such alternative sources.

But electric company representatives are cautioning the Commission not to take any drastic measures in terms of renewable energy.

During the Friday meeting, Tom Hansen of Tucson Electric Power warned Mayes that renewable energy might not only be available on the order of 10 percent, but the costs could impact the price of electric.

He said that kind of heavy-handed approach could negatively impact the economy.

"Those kind of words are just scare tactics," Mayes told Hansen. "Utilities are going to have to undergo an attitude adjustment. They have got to reform the way they look at this program."

Hansen further suggested that the Commission take a harder look at renewable energy percentages in other states that are considered progressive on the issue, such as California and Pennsylvania.

He said that other states often count hydroelectric power as renewable energy, and noted that Arizona gets 12.3 percent of its energy from renewables if dams are counted.

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